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ABSTRACT

Twenty-one women who were full- or part-time returning students of higher education in England, most at the Dorset Institute, were interviewed about their secondary schooling, age of leaving school, reason for disappointing examination results, career guidance given at school, parental influence, career aspirations, first job after leaving school, domestic circumstances, work after childbearing, qualifications between school and degree, age at which they commenced degree education, and reasons for studying for a degree. The study found that most of the women had not done well at school, had received very little support from either parents or career advisors, and had found themselves hampered in their efforts later in life by the domestic considerations of children, husbands, and mobility, or if single or childless, by the financial necessity of supporting themselves. All the women were intelligent and capable of carrying out higher level positions, and all were prepared to work hard to escape the dead-end jobs to which they were otherwise restricted. The study concluded that those who pursued full-time courses were able thereafter to enter female-oriented work such as teaching or social work later in life. Those who were doing part-time degree work have not had their efforts rewarded to date. None of the women found it easy to undertake higher education alongside their other obligations. According to the study, it appears that underachievement early in life can only be overcome by a successful juggling act that balances hard work with domestic constraints and is undertaken with a great deal of determined effort and sustained by outside support. (KC)

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Professional careers for women - an opportunity for all

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Date

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Professional Careers for Women - an opportunity for all?

An analysis of twenty- one histories of women who have used, or are using, the route of higher education as mature students as a means to professional careers later in life.

A great deal has been written during this decade on employment opportunities for women documenting their necessity as a labour resource and also highlighting the difficulties of their being able to fulfil their potential at work given the paucity of childcare facilities in this country. Large companies employ Equal Opportunities Advisers and have instigated Career Returner Schemes to enable women (particularly in the "professional" category) to maintain careers on a lifelong basis. There would appear to be more hope that women will be able, should they so wish, to compete on equal terms with men, although the practical difficulties of combining a career with domestic repsonsibilities remain daunting.
There are many capable women, however, who do not "fit the system" (ie who do not take a degree, get their careers established, have children and then resume employment within five years) . Are women who underachieve earlier in life able to start professional careers later on ?
One way of attempting to do this is via the route of higher education. The following data is taken from a degree project which included the case histories of twenty- one women who had taken or were taking degrees, either full- time or part- time, in an effort to fulfil their potential at work. It analyses the pattern of their lives to date and whether their efforts were successful.

Analysis of interviewees.

All but three of the interviewees were or had been students of the Dorset Institute. The part- time students were contacted by a member of staff and the remaining interviewees were found through personal contacts.
The only reason for calling a halt after twenty- one interviews was that of time constraints at the beginning of the autumn term.

The pros and cons of eliciting information from interviews as opposed to sending out questionnaires has been well documented in Kane's book[1] and many other publications. It would not have been difficult to draw up a questionnaire asking the women a series of questions designed to establish the pattern of their lives (in general terms) and their consequent career patterns. There is the danger with this method of impersonality and missing

[1]Kane Eileen. doing your own research. Marion Boyars. 1985.

information altogether; one could not be sure that some of the women would not perceive themselves as being "pigeon-holed" by this and automatically be less forthcoming with information.

All but three of the women were interviewed in their homes (two came to my house and I saw one at college). The decision to interview them was, I believe, correct. No standard questions were used and the interviews were only structured in the sense that they began with questions about the women's secondary schooling and ended with their long- term ambitions. All were extremely open and honest about their lives; the common theme that emerged from twenty- one very different people was dissatisfaction with the way of life they could have settled for had they not chosen the hard grind of studying later in life at a time when their lives were already fairly full with other, pressing, commitments.
The ages of the women ranged from 25 - 49, with the majority in their thirties. All the women that had done full- time degrees are now in their thirties .

Type of degree

Age	Number	F/T	P/T	Other
25-30	3	-	3	-
31-35	6	2	4	-
36-40	4	1	2	1
41-45	5	4	-	1
46-50	3	1	2	-
Total	**21**	**8**	**11**	**2**

F/T = 6 Combined Studies , 2 Business Studies degrees
P/T = 10 Business Studies, 1 B.Ed
Other = Open University (Social Sciences).

Secondary Schooling

15 of the women had passed the eleven plus, 4 failed and 2 did not sit it.
Surprisingly, five of the women had no O levels at all when they left school; this is a high percentage when one considers the academic level of work they undertook later in life. One can hardly generalise about women as a whole from a sample of twenty-one people but it would provide some basis to the claim that many women do not fulfil their potential at school and only a great deal of determined effort later in life corrects this.

Number of O levels passed

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
25-30	-	-	1	-	-	-	2	1	-	-
31-35	1	-	-	-	-	-	2	1	1	1
36-40	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-
41-45	1	-	-	-	1	1	1	-	1	-
46-50	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-
Total	**5**	**-**	**1**	**-**	**1**	**1**	**5**	**3**	**4**	**1**
Full -time	2	-	-	-	1	-	1	1	2	1
Part-time	3	-	1	-	-	-	4	1	2	-
Other	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-

Only just over half of the women had any A levels and for a variety of reasons their grades were not very good. In the majority of cases the women were not very happy at school.

A levels passed

	0	1	2	3
25-30	-	1	1	2
31-35	3	-	1	1
36-40	2	-	1	1
41-45	5	-	-	-
46-50	3	-	-	-
Total	**13**	**1**	**3**	**4**
Full- time	5	-	2	1
Part- time	6	1	1	2
Other	1	-	-	1

Age of leaving school

The lady who left school at fourteen did so because of financial pressures at home - she needed to work to help her family financially. Those women who did not stay on in the Sixth form did not resent this at the time.

	14	15	16	17	18
25-30	-	-	-	-	3
31-35	-	-	-	3	3
36-40	-	1	1	-	2
41-45	1	-	2	2	-
46-50	-	1	2	-	-
Total	**1**	**2**	**5**	**5**	**8**

Full- time	1	-	3	1	3
Part- time	-	2	5	-	4
Other	-	-	-	1	1

Reason for disappointing examination results.

The reasons for the disappointing examination results obtained by the women are listed below, by age. Unhappiness at school and lack of application are the most common reasons.

25 - 30	Good results unnecessary at time Miserable at school Lack of application
31- 35	Poor health Miserable at school Lack of application (2) Told not clever
36- 40	No opportunity for examinations Lack of application (2)
41- 45	Poor health Left before taking examinations Miserable at school (2) Had to help at home
46- 50	Parental ill-health Parental influence Introversion

*** 2 women did not get disappointing results**

Careers Guidance given at school

The women interviewed for this project were at school during the nineteen fifties, sixties and seventies. The lack of career guidance given and the stereotyped nature of any advice that was passed on is most noticeable. Most of these women went to "classical" grammar schools which were very narrow in approach. The standard of advice given in those days has doubtless handicapped thousands of women; one hopes and trusts that this is a particular handicap which time will eradicate as the greater awareness of the opportunities for and capabilities of women filters through to the schools.

	None	Some
25-30	1	2 (HND Business Studies; Teaching)
31-35	4	2 (Secretary/ Teaching; Dental Nurse/ Civil Service)

36-40	3	1 (Nursing/ Teaching)
41-45	5	-
46-50	3	-
Total	**16**	**5**

Parental Influence

One would expect to find that the older women would have been more heavily influenced by their parents, and in general, this was the case. The fact that this was so was a reflection of their lack of confidence at the time; again, the degree of lack of confidence and reluctance to go against parental advice has surely been eradicated to a certain extent among the "younger generation" through the all- pervasive influence of the media. One would expect that in the future young women will be less able to apportion part of the blame for their under-achievement at the feet of their parents.

Influenced strongly by parents whilst under 21

	Yes	No
25-30	-	3
31-35	4	2
36-40	1	3
41-45	3	2
46-50	3	-
Total	**11**	**10**

One- third of the women had parents who were against higher education for females. This is an alarmingly high proportion but surely these women were "victims" of the decades they grew up in and such attitudes are changing as their generation, themselves, become parents.

Career aspirations whilst at school

Two- thirds of the women did not know what they wanted to do after they left school. Again, one must be careful not to generalise from a small sample but one would assume this to be true of most young men and women at that age.

Knew what wanted to do whilst at school

	No	Yes	
25-30	2	1	Fashion designer
30-35	4	2	Buy a hotel; radiographer
36-40	2	2	Go to University; Policewoman
41-45	3	2	Nurse
46-50	3	-	
Total	**14**	**7**	

First job after leaving school

There are no startling surprises among the jobs taken by the women when they left school. Great emphasis was laid by their families on the necessity for a " steady, secure " job - an emphasis which the women, themselves, acknowledged and endorsed.

Age	Job
25-30	None; Trainee Computer Operator; HND Student
31-35	Bilingual Secretarial Student; Clerical Officer;Secretarial; Policewoman; HND Student;Trainee Radiographer
36-40	Clerk (2), Secretarial; Police Cadet
41-45	Clerk; Sales Assistant (2), Waitress; Laboratory Assistant
46-50	Bilingual Secretarial Student; Secretarial (2)

Domestic Circumstances

One - third of the women were not married (a fairly high proportion). 5 had divorced their first husbands. Those women who are not married all felt very keenly the constraint of having to support themselves and only one had done a full- time degree because she had a business at the time and supplemented her grant this way. The rest felt unable to give up their income and live on a grant; they were free to continue their education full- time anywhere in the country but were not prepared to do so. Those women who had done full- time degrees said they would have been unable to do so without some financial support (although this does not imply they all received moral support!)

12 out of the fourteen women who had been married continued to work until they had children.

Nine of the women are childless so only two of the married women do not have children (2 had 1 child, 7 had 2 children, 2 had 3 children and 1 woman 4 children). The importance of their children to them and the need to consider their well-being was naturally a very important aspect in the lives of the rest. None of these women felt content and/or fulfilled by the roles of mother and wife for very long despite their deep affection for their children and gladness that they had had them. Several of them commentated that they were not " coffee-morning people " and that they had felt out of place and unhappy with such roles. At the same time, they were not prepared to change their lives at their children's expense. Much has been written about the guilt and conflict experienced by working women viz-a-viz their children. None of the women would have contemplated restarting their education unless they could make suitable childcaring arrangements or their children were old enough to look after themselves. None of these women contemplated leaving Dorset to study because they did not want to uproot their children.

Work after Childbearing

Most of the women went back to work quite quickly after having their last child although, as can be seen below, the level of jobs they took were low.

Length of time before working after childbearing

	Immediately	1	2	3	6	9	10 years
25-30	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
31-35	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
36-40	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
41-45	1	1	-	2	-	1	-
46-50	1	1	-	-	1	-	-
Total	**3**	**2**	**1**	**2**	**1**	**1**	**1**

The constraints of having children upon female employment are illustrated quite clearly. The findings of the Women in Employment Survey[2] are backed up here; unless women have full-time childminding help (either from grandparents or professional child- minders) they have to take what jobs they can get, at the hours they can manage. The irony is, of course, that only women in well- paid jobs can afford the full- time level of care they would consider necessary for their children.

[2]Martin Jean and Roberts Ceridwen. Women in Employment. A Lifetime Perspective. HMSO 1984

First job after childbearing

25-30	Helped in husband's business
31-35	Part- time office work
36-40	Full- time student
41-45	Casual; part- time cardiographer; youth work; evening factory work; night nurse (SEN)
46-50	Part- time typist; part- time secretary; helped in husband's business

All the interviewees were asked how old they were when they passed their driving test. Most took it fairly young and thought no more about it; those who passed it later in life, however, (four were over thirty) commented what a difference it made to their outlook on life, giving them, as it did, independence and widening their mobility within the area.

Qualifications in between school and degree

Not surprisingly, many of the women took some qualifications between leaving school and starting their degree. Their success at passing these exams (and the - to them - surprising ease with which they passed them) gave them the confidence to consider studying at a higher level. At the same time, it increased their awareness of the necessity of "pieces of paper" if they were to avoid "dead-end" jobs for ever.

Qualifications completed between school and degree

	Number of women
R.S.A	1
O levels	5
A levels	4
TOPS Secretarial course	1
Cert. in youth & community work	1
Bilingual secretarial course	1
Open University (not completed)	1
HND Business Studies	2
London Chamber of Commerce Private Secretarial Qualification	1

Certificate in Management Studies	2
3 months secretarial course	1
ONC Public Administration	1
BEC National course	1
ONC Business Studies	1
Teacher's Training Certificate	1

Age at which commenced degree education

There was a considerable variation among the ages at which the women started their degrees. In general, the full- time students were older with children at school. One would imagine the shorter time involved to get through and start work influenced these women more than anything else. Most of the part- timers did not have children, did not want to give up their jobs and were therefore prepared for these reasons to take longer to complete their studies.

	23	24	25	28	29	31	32	33	34
25-30	-	2	1	-	-				
31-35	1	-	-	-	2	1	3	1	-
36-40	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1
41-45	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	-
	35	37	43	44					
41-45	2	2	-	-					
46-50	-	1	1	1					

Major reason for doing full- time degree

The reasons for taking full- time degrees are broken down according to the current age of the interviewees. These reasons are very much what one would expect to have documented.

Age	
31-35	To improve employability and stretch mind. Saw friends doing higher degrees and felt she was as capable as they were.
36-40	To help find a profitable and manageable career.

41-45	To help her make a living to support her children. To help find a profitable and manageable career. To stretch her mind and ensure she wouldn't have to do dead end jobs for ever. Felt she was vegetating and wanted to do social work.
46-50	Regret at lack of qualifications.

Major reason for doing part- time and not full- time degree

Again, these reasons are broken down by age. The reluctance to become a full- time student and live on a grant is apparent. None of these women believed they could financially afford to do so and most of them were afraid to give up the security of their jobs. Several of them commented that they enjoyed working and could not see themselves fitting in as students.

25-30	To fill in spare time plus she had a mortgage to pay Enjoyed working in business with husband and did not want to stop. Buying home; did not want to give up income to be full- time student
31-35	Couldn't manage financially on a grant Felt it gave her necessary and greater flexibility for her domestic commitments. Wanted to continue with her career; didn't feel she could support herself as a full-time student Financial commitments and used to and enjoyed working.
36-40	Afraid to give up her job in case she couldn't get another in her forties. Was not prepared to give up salary
46-49	Could not afford to give up job. Financial clampdown in county would not allow her to take a sabbatical.

Reason for doing Open University as opposed to college degree

36-40	Sorry did not have degree but could not afford grant and did not feel she would fit in with young students.

41-45 Felt her children were too young to commit herself to a full- time course plus unsupportive husband.

Major benefits of degree education mentioned by interviewees

The benefit mentioned time and time again was self- confidence. For years, many of these women had felt in their hearts they were capable of "greater things"; education gave and is giving them the self- belief to carry them out. Although, as stated elsewhere, the personalities of the interviewees are very different the moral support received from other students was very important to them - the meeting of kindred spirits and minds made them feel much less isolated than they had in their lived to date. This is as true for the part- time as for the full- time students. The stimulation and necessary discipline of the learning experience, itself, has also been a vital factor. The women seem delighted to have found that they could cope with the hard work and appreciated the new avenues that were opened up to them as a result.

	F/T	P/T
Self- confidence	6	3
Opening up of the mind	3	4
Finding out how to find things out	1	2
Discipline	1	
The support of fellow students	1	3
A sense of worth	2	1
Gave her direction	1	1
A rewarding experience	1	2
Sense of achievement	1	

General constraints mentioned by interviewees

Mobility or lack of it because of the need to get home to the children

Domestic commitments - very important to those women with children

Money - to bring up children and pay mortgage

Husbands - particularly if they were unsupportive

Age - where appropriate

These constraints all speak for themselves although their effect on these women's lives cannot be overstated. One could say, perhaps, that men are also tied by such matters as children and money and of course they are but it would appear not to the same extent.

Effect of higher education on these women's careers.

A major reason for taking higher education was to improve these women's job prospects. It has to be remembered that all of them made the conscious decision to undertake this within the locality and were therefore restricted to what was available. It is therefore impossible to say, given the small sample size of 21, with any finality that higher education later in life enables women to make a career for themselves that they could not otherwise undertake.

Of the nine women who took full-time degrees all had better jobs at the end than when they started and are now teaching, or employed as social workers or barristers. The one exception is currently an Assistant Management Accountant with the prospect of taking professional exams on day release , should she wish to do so. The part- timers have not fared so well. The lady that took a part- time B.Ed was teaching when she started it. She believes that her age (49) is now working against her when it comes to promotion and that really her degree has not made any difference to her prospects. Another woman who took an Open University Degree says it has made no difference to her career within the Civil service whatsoever but the other Open University Degree Student has had more success; she was able to go on and take her CQSW as a result of her Open University Degree and is now a qualified Social Worker.

Several of the part- time students are still in the middle of their degree. So far, their studies have made no difference to their jobs with the exception of a woman who runs her own business with her husband. In her case the difference has come through the greater understanding of all aspects of her business. Only one of the part- timers has given up the degree. The rest intend to finish it although they are doubtful of the validity of "taking honours", feeling, as they do, that it won't make any difference to their careers. They are hopeful but not 100% convinced that their hard work will help them to achieve more worthwhile careers - one hopes that they will be successful.

Conclusion

The author wished to test her hypothesis that it is extremely difficult for women who underachieve at school to catch up later in life. According to Ceri Philip's[3] article on mature graduates, 11.4% of all graduates are " mature " although they were slightly less likely to find employment afterwards. Social Trends 1988 has pointed out there are 33,000 part- time students undertaking higher education, 23% via the Open University. One must assume that although a few will undertake this for the sake of learning that most will be attempting to use the route of higher education as one means of improving career propsects.

The twenty- one women interviewed were all attempting to do this by the means of degree level education as either full- time or part- time students. The constraints they highlighted in attempting to do this fitted the general pattern of most women. Broadly speaking they had not done well at school, had received very little support from either parents or career advisors and had found themselves hampered in their efforts later in life by the domestic considerations of children, husbands and mobility or, if single or childless, by the financial necessity of supporting themselves. All the women were intelligent and capable of carrying out higher level posts. All of them were prepared to work hard to escape the dead- end jobs they were otherwise restricted to. Obviously, a limited range of cases and degrees were considered here so the results can not be taken as representative of female mature students in Britain as a whole. However one would assume that the fact that they were restricted to, or felt they had to restrict themselves to) the courses that were available in their home area would apply to most mature students.

All of these women considered that higher education was their only hope of improving their prospects at work . For a variety of reasons (mostly unhappiness and lack of parental support) they had not done well at school and were forced thereby to take employment that was below their capabilitities. Once in this employment they were trapped by the nature of their work, the financial necessity of supporting themselves if single and looking after their children, if married; higher education seemed the only way out of this for them but none of them were either able or willing to comb the country for the most suitable course and had to take advantage of what there was locally.
The conclusion that can be drawn from these women is that those

[3]Phillips Ceri. The Mature Graduate Labour Market. Article. Employment Gazette. June 1987. HMSO

who did full- time courses were able thereafter to enter female orientated work such as teaching , the law or social work later in life. Those who are doing a part- time degree have not, for the most part, had their efforts rewarded to date. None of the women have found it easy to undertake higher education alongside their other obligations.
It would appear, then that higher education does enable women to make a fresh start in life in career terms. It does, however, require tenacity , discipline , planning and determination to stick at it.

The prospects for bright young women who "fit the system" looks bright; it looks as they will be able to maintain professional career profiles providing they can make suitable childcare arrangements and reconcile any personal guilt feelings over their children with working. For the rest, the position is not as straightforward. It would appear that underachievement early in life can only be overcome by a successful juggling act which balances hard work with domestic constraints and is undertaken with a great deal of determined effort and sustained by outside support.